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FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9859
INFO USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY ATHENS
AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
AMEMBASSY DHAKA
AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD
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NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
SECDEF WASHDC
CDRUSARPAC FT SHAFTER HI//APCW/APOP//
CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI//J3/J332/J52//

UNCLAS COLOMBO 000456

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SCA (BOUCHER), SCA/INS AND PRM
STATE ALSO PASS USAID
AID/W FOR ANE/SCA, DCHA/FFP (DWORKEN, KSHEIN)
AID/W FOR DCHA/OFDA (MORRISP, ACONVERY, RTHAYER, RKERR)
ATHENS FOR PCARTER
BANGKOK FOR USAID/DCHA/OFDA (WBERGER)
KATHMANDU FOR USAID/DCHA/OFDA AND POL (SBERRY)
GENEVA FOR RMA (NKYLOH, NHILGERT, MPITOTTI)
USUN NEW YORK FOR ECOSOC (D MERCADO)
SECDEF FOR OSD - POLICY
PACOM ALSO FOR J-5

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SUBJECT: Northern Sri Lanka SitRep 59

REF: A) Colombo 454 B) Colombo 448 C) Colombo 435 D) Colombo 432
E) Colombo 425 F) Colombo 418 G) Colombo 414 H) Colombo 413 I)
Colombo 412 J) Colombo 411 K) Colombo 402 L) Colombo 401 and
previous

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Conditions continue to worsen for civilians caught inside the NFZ, as the GSL presses on in its pursuit of remaining LTTE cadres and leadership. The UN estimates between 50,000 and 80,000 civilians may remain inside the NFZ, while between 100,000 and 110,000 appear to have escaped the NFZ since early April 20. At a briefing with the diplomatic community, FM Bogollogama stated that not a single civilian casualty had been caused by GSL military forces. The UN is highlighting the enormous need for capacity to care for these recent evacuees, and FM Bogollogama called for international assistance. End summary.

TERRIBLE CONDITIONS INSIDE NFZ REPORTED

12. (SBU) ICRC reported very dire conditions inside the NFZ when their medical evacuation ferry landed there the afternoon of April 21. Shelling around the new landing site was constant during their evacuation of 350 persons. They reported conditions among civilians were so bad that not only was it impossible to bring in and distribute any food supplies, but food was no longer even a priority at this point.

13. (SBU) Post contact inside the NFZ at Valayanmadam reported more heavy shelling the morning of April 23, as the LTTE continue to try to push civilians towards the southern end of the NFZ. Civilians are having trouble getting to wells for water due to continuous firing.

14. (SBU) Foreign Minister Bogollagama gave a briefing on the current situation to the diplomatic community the morning of April 23. He stated that since the morning of April 20, 102,790 civilians had been evacuated from the NFZ. He called this "the largest hostage rescue operation that has been undertaken by any military in the world." He went on to say that this was a "fitting reply to certain skeptical members of the international community who, obviously misguided by Tiger propaganda, have been making persistent predictions of massive civilian casualties, in the event our security forces embarked on the rescue mission." He stated that GSL forces are not shelling the NFZ.

15. (SBU) FM Bogollagama stated that GSL shares the concern of the international community over plight of civilians still under LTTE control, and acknowledged the enormity of the IDP situation now at hand. He called for help from the international community with tents, water supply equipment, and medical assistance.

UN OUTLINES NEEDS TO FM

16. (SBU) During the q-and-a after the briefing with FM Bogollagama, UN Resident Representative Neil Buhne outlined the critical

humanitarian needs at this point as more rapid passage of supplies through military checkpoints going to Vavuniya, the sharing of IDP registration information with the UN, the identification of additional shelter sites, and the importance of continued medical evacuations from the NFZ by ICRC. Buhne said the UN hoped that they would still be allowed to facilitate a further exit of civilians from the NFZ as had been agreed upon during the Nambiyar visit.

FM ON CASUALTIES AND FOREIGN MEDICAL STAFF

17. (SBU) DCM welcomed the escape of many civilians from the conflict zone but underlined deep U.S. concern about the tens of thousands who remain in the zone and about the high level of civilian casualties. He asked for the government's estimate of casualties since the rescue operation began. FM Bogollagama stated categorically that no civilian casualties had been caused by the GSL military. He said any casualties were either LTTE cadres or were the victims of LTTE firing or suicide blasts.

18. (SBU) In response to another question by the DCM, Bogollagama stated that foreign medical personnel would be allowed into Sri Lanka to accompany any field hospitals or other medical supplies provided by the international community.

GSL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF INACCURATE NUMBERS

19. (SBU) In notes accompanying the text of FM Bogollagama's speech, it was acknowledged that earlier GSL estimates of the number of civilians inside the NFZ had been wrong. This was not mentioned during the actual briefing, but the text noted that while GSL estimates just prior to April 20 were of 50-60,000 civilians inside the NFZ, 100,000 had exited since that date.

MILITARY SAYS ONE WEEK TO CLEAR NFZ

110. (SBU) On April 23 the Sri Lankan Army assessed operations to clear the NFZ may take a week longer. The heaviest fighting was currently along the A-35 road near the western edge of the NFZ. The military were convinced Prabhakaran, Pottu Amman, and Soosai were still in the NFZ. They felt LTTE ground operations were being commanded by Velawan. They estimated the LTTE had 2 artillery tubes left, used in direct fire mode. LTTE still had numerous mortars, but a shortage of small arms and machine gun ammunition. Sri Lankan military estimated 10-15K civilians still in the NFZ, based in part on that figure provided April 22 by the LTTE's just captured former media chief. Army estimated about 300 hardcore LTTE cadres left, while the Sri Lankan Navy estimated 200-300 Sea Tigers remained. The Sri Lankan Air Force said no airplanes remained though the 2

small helicopters the LTTE had were unaccounted for.

STRONG INDIAN STATEMENT

¶11. (SBU) The Foreign Secretary and National Security Advisor of India released a strong statement on April 23, as follows: "The Prime Minister reviewed the evolving situation in Sri Lanka this

evening with me, Raksha Mantri, National Security Adviser and Foreign Secretary.

"We are very unhappy at the continued killing of innocent Tamil civilians in Sri Lanka. These killings must stop. The Sri Lankan Government has a responsibility to protect its own citizens. And the LTTE must stop its barbaric attempt to hold civilians hostage.

"There is no military solution to this ongoing humanitarian crisis, and all concerned should recognise this fact. The only lasting solution will come from political efforts to address the real concerns of the Tamil people, giving them lives of dignity within the Sri Lankan mainstream.

"India will work to achieve this goal, and will do all it can to also ameliorate the humanitarian crisis caused by the conflict.

"I am speaking to many of my counterparts around the world to join us in this effort."

MEDICAL/FOOD SHIP ACCESS VERY DIFFICULT

¶12. (SBU) ICRC reported ferry access for medical evacuations was increasingly difficult at the new site. Another 450-500 evacuations were hoped for on April 23, with another trip planned for April 24, with some 1,000 to 1,500 waiting for evacuation. The WFP food ship was loaded and waiting for word from the ICRC ferry of when conditions at landing site would allow food delivery, but offload and delivery of food very difficult under constant fire. The Government Agent for Mullaitivu, who had been inside the NFZ and instrumental in keeping the evacuations and food shipments running, was reportedly trying to leave the NFZ now.

UN ESTIMATES 50,000 TO 80,000 REMAIN

¶13. (SBU) The UN, while acknowledging the increasing difficulty in getting accurate numbers, estimated between 50,000 and 80,000 civilians remained inside the NFZ, with some 110,000 already evacuated since early April 20. A UN source said their current estimate of casualties in the NFZ from January 20 to April 20, not including the last 3 days, was 6,432 killed and 13,946 injured.

BLAKE